

HOME

By
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A Story of
Today and
of All Days

CHAPTER XXXIV—Continued.

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A hard light came into Alix's eyes. Gerry felt himself suddenly alone. He went doggedly on. He told of the chase and the capture, of how he and the girl had seen the canoe drift out into the clutch of the eddy and swirl out into the river and away. He told her of how they laughed and Alix shrank. Gerry paused, his brow puckered. He wished he could tell in words the battle of his spirit, the utter ruin of his downfall. He could not and instead he sighed.

There was something in that sigh so eloquent of defeated expression that it succeeded where words might have failed. It called to Alix with the strong call of helpless things. It drew back her mind to Gerry. With him and the girl she threaded the path to Fazenda Flores. Its ruin sprang upon her through his eyes. With him she discovered the traces of an ancient ditch, with him and the old darky she dug along that line through long, hot months. She grew to know Lieber as the tale went on and finally to love him because of all things Lieber seemed to need love—somebody else's love—most. She amused herself with Kemp and his drawl. She tried to keep her thoughts away from Margarita and at the coming of Margarita's boy, she winced.

As he finished telling of the coming of the Man, Gerry stopped short. The thought came to him with tremendous force that Alix too had gone through that for him. The impulse to get up and throw himself before her and on his knees to thank her almost tore him from his seat but he fought it down. He hurried on with his story. He told of the coming of Alan and of the revelation he had brought. And then in a choked voice and only because he had set himself to tell the whole truth he pictured the flood, the death of True Blue, and the overwhelming by the waters before his very eyes of Margarita and the Man. Then he arose and with hands braced on the table leaned towards Alix. "I have told you this so that perhaps you may understand what I am going to tell you now. If the flood had not come—if Margarita and the Man had lived—I would not have come back."

Alix sat very still and studied Gerry's face. He had finished the task he had set himself to do and he was suddenly very tired. His eyes dropped as though from their own weight and



"Please, Alix," He Begged, "Please Don't Cry."

then he raised them again to her inscrutable face.

"Well?" he asked after a long pause.

"Well?" replied Alix.

Gerry's stalwart figure drooped. "It is quite just," he said, "after all that, that you should not want me. I have spent the last weeks making myself ready for that. You waited for me; I didn't wait for you. If you do not want me, I will go away."

Alix rose slowly to her feet. She looked very slim and tall in her clinging gown. To Gerry she looked very cold. "Before you go," she said, "there is just one thing. I wish you would kiss me—once."

Gerry's body straightened and stiffened. He stared at her grave face with wondering eyes. Then he felt a strange tingling ripple through his blood and before he knew what he did he had swept her from her feet, crushed her to him, brushed the crown of hair back from her brow and kissed her eyes, her mouth, her throat. He was rough with her. He was bruising her body, her lips, but Alix clung to him and laughed. Then suddenly all her slim body relaxed and slipped through his arms to a little white heap on the floor. She began to sob. Gerry stooped down, picked her up tenderly and laid her on the great leather couch. He knelt beside her. On one arm he pillowed her head, with the other hand he sought hers. "Please, Alix," he begged, "please don't cry."

"I'm not crying," sobbed Alix, "I'm laughing."

Gerry smiled and waited. Soon Alix became quiet. Her eyes closed. She drew a long, quivering breath and then she opened her eyes again and her lips broke into the old dear smile, the smile of an opening flower. "I am tired—tired," she said, "but I believe I'm almost hungrier than I am tired."

"I'm glad you said it first," replied Gerry, giving serious thought to the fact that he was faint with hunger himself. "Ever since some funny Johnny wrote, 'Feed the brute,' we men have been shy about echoing our stomachs. It's four o'clock. Hours after lunch time."

"Really?" said Alix, nestling down closer to his arm and letting her smiling eyes wander over him. "How well this suit fits you. There's something about it—It isn't, is it?"

Gerry nodded. "Same old suit. By the way, when I came in John said you told him to telephone to the club and say you wished to see me. What made you think I would go to the club first?"

Alix looked puzzled. "I didn't. I didn't tell John to telephone."

She paused, still puzzling, then her face cleared. "Why—poor old John—he's getting very old, you know, Gerry. That was three years ago I told him to telephone—the day you never came back. It must have been the suit. He saw you standing there in the same suit and three years became as one day to the old fellow."

Gerry sighed. "Alix, do you want those three years to become as a day to us?"

Alix shook her head slowly from side to side. "No, dear, I don't. They have given me—given us both—far more than they took away." She put her bare arms around his neck, drew him down and kissed him. "You do not know yet all that they have given you. You think you have come back and found me, a frittering butterfly in a great empty house. But you've found only my abandoned cocoon. I'm not here at all. I've packed myself into the dearest little bundle of pink fat, yellow curls and chubby legs, and left the bundle on Red Hill."

Gerry nodded but he was grave and silent. Not in a day nor a month could he altogether forget the Man.

Gerry had always been quiet but during the long drive from the station to The Firs, his silence amounted to a penetrating stillness. Alix felt it but it did not depress her; she knew herself to be in the presence of a communion. Gerry was devoting the hour of his return to the scenes of his boyhood to a silent consecration. These cool valleys and hollows; the Low road, with its purling accompaniment of hidden waters; the embowered still nave of Long Lane—were as the ancestral halls of the Lansings. It was right that he should do homage to the memories they evoked.

To his mother Gerry made no explanations. He knew that to her it was enough that her boy had come back. When Mrs. Lansing released him, Alix caught his hand and led him up to the nursery. Together they looked down upon their sleeping child.

Gerry, Jr., was fat to the verge of a split. His curly tow head was tousled and on his brow a slight perspiration testified to the labor of sound sleep. His arms were outstretched. His legs had kinks at the knees, they were so chubby. His petulant little mouth was half open, disclosing tiny teeth.

"Isn't he a beauty?" asked Alix a little loudly, wishing he would awaken.

Gerry nodded. With his eyes still

on the child he put his arm around Alix and drew her to him. What Margarita had done for him, Alix had done. As he felt her frail body quivering in his embrace, as he looked back and measured the sacrifice by what the awful night of the coming of the Man had taught him, he was overwhelmed by a new humility. He turned Alix's face up to his. His lips moved in an effort to thank her but words failed him. Alix understood. She lifted her arms around his neck and drew his head down. He held her body very close as he kissed her, softly, adoringly. Alix hid her face against his shoulder for a moment and then threw back her head and shook the tears from her eyelashes. She smiled through wet eyes. "I am afraid he's not quite perfect—inside. Such a temper, Gerry. I'm afraid he'll grow up into a man about town and awfully wild." She turned grave eyes on Gerry, Jr., and her brows puckered. "What do you think?"

Gerry smiled. "From the looks of him I predict he gets his letter in freshman year—center on the football team."

"Yes, perhaps," said Alix thoughtfully. "Everybody calls him Fatty already."

It was from Alan that Gerry learned that Kemp was still in town closing up his connection with the orchid firm. Gerry wired him, begging him to come to The Firs for a few days before he went West. Alix had told of Kemp's word of comfort.

After the first excitement of getting home was over Gerry found himself restless with the same restlessness that had attacked him during the days at Piranhas. He tried for a solution in the same way. Day after day, long before the rest of the Hill was awake, he was off for a ten-mile walk.

At first it was with head dropped and eyes on the ground that he plowed his way through a dew-soaked world, but there came a time when he walked with head thrown back, full lungs and level eyes.

Then Kemp arrived. Gerry tried to get him to join him in his walks but Kemp shook his head sadly.

"Ef yo' can't let me have a hoss, Mr. Lansing," he said, "I'll ride the cow."

Gerry laughed. They saddled the horses themselves and started out. On the top of old Bald Head Gerry dismounted and sat down on a rock. Kemp followed suit.

"Kemp," said Gerry, "I want to thank you for the things you said to my wife—Alix."

Kemp flushed and waved a deprecating hand.

"You saw things straight," went on Gerry, "and I want to thank you, too, for letting me hog-tie myself."

"I ain't curious about that, Mr. Lansing," said Kemp, "so much's about what you're goin' to do when yo' untie yo'self."

"Well," said Gerry, "I've thought that out too. For a while it used to break my heart to think about Fazenda Flores but it came to me the other day that what there is of me that amounts to anything is just Fazenda Flores."

"When a man learns to eat work just like he does food because he's hungry for it, there's bound to be a place for him anywhere. It has struck me there are a lot of fields around here, some of them mine, that are about ready for resurrection, and resurrection is my job."

"I don't know exactly how I'm going to start but it may be planting potatoes. You can begin a resurrection with any one of a number of simple things. It doesn't matter much which one you pick on as long as you start right down at the bottom and spread yourself in the subsoil of things. Everything that grows starts down deep except your orchids and they are parasites—"

"Easy on orchids," interjected Kemp.

"Sorry, Kemp. Orchids are ornamental but excepting your favorites they're not even beautiful. Look at a Cypripedium Vexillarium—"

"Hybrid," grunted Kemp.

"A man in his D. T.'s couldn't beat it for gorgeous horror," finished Gerry. "But that's neither here nor there. What I'm driving at is this. If I had never been tossed over the home fence I would have lived and died an ornamental citizen with the girth of a beer barrel. But now my eyes are a bit open and I can see that the simple things of life are the big things. Growth from the roots is the strength of a man and of his people. I've come home in more senses than one."

I'm going to send down my roots right here."

Kemp had been whittling. When Gerry had finished he pocketed his knife and gazed thoughtfully down the valley. "It seems to me, Mr. Lansing, that you 'nd me have been travelin' different trails but come together at the same gap. You remember 'The Purple City'?"

Gerry nodded. "Wal, seems to me thet 'ceptin' in a man's own mind thet ain't no purple cities. What a man's got to find ain't purple cities but the power to see one when he's got it. You had your right here in this valley an' you side on Red Hill. You grew up in it but you never seen it—not till you learned how. What you been sayin' about the simple things of life—the things thet



The Sun Took a Long, Last Look at Red Hill.

is at the bottom—has he'ped my seein' parts a powerful lot. I knowed before I come to Red Hill that I was goin' out West to stay but I didn't rightly know why. Now ef you ask me what I know I can tell you I know considerable."

"Out in Noo Mexico they's a ranch in the fork of Big and Little creek that's the greenest patch in the shadow of White mountain. It's mine and it's got a three-room shack on it that could grow if need was. I know a girl that's been holdin' a four-flush against an orchid's weak pair till she's jest about sick of the game, but she's drawed and filled on the last hand though she hain't had a chance to look at her cards yet."

"For some while the's been a purple light hangin' over Big and Little creek an' I reckon I'll be able to see it plain'er an' plain'er the higher I get to it an' if the girl will he'p me I reckon that in a small way we'll soon be growin' a purple city that will feed from yo' hand. Ef ever you feel the need of some bran' new air, Mr. Lansing, you come out to Big and Little. There won't be much besides air but it'll be fresh made on White mountain an' you can smell it comin' down through the pines an' see it playin' with the leaves on the cottonwoods an' plowin' through the tops of the sorghum."

They sat for some time in silence then Gerry said, "I've been calling you 'Kemp' since I first saw you but you still hang on to the 'mister' when you talk to me. Cut it out, Kemp."

Kemp flushed slightly. "Some things is fittin' an' some ain't," he said, "an' we can't always rightly say why. Some folks is governed by conscience but most by pride. Its goin' to be 'Kemp' and 'Mister Lansing' to the end of the chapter, Mr. Lansing, an' no friendship lost either. Shake."

They shook hands solemnly, mounted and started back to Red Hill. Gerry had found the key to Kemp's strength. It was the key of strength. Kemp belonged on the Hill, and with the people of true blood anywhere, not only because he was himself always but because he defended what he could hold and no more. He was a definition for independence.

CHAPTER XXXVI

It was late afternoon of a day in the gorgeous month. A shower had fallen on Red Hill and after it had come the sun. Wisps of mare's-tail cloud hurried across the clean-washed heavens as though they were ashamed to be caught in their ragged clothes under a blue sky. Downy-topped masses of cumulus poked drowsy heads over the horizon and watched them run. Out of the dome of heaven filtered a single trill of song.

The Hill was very still but presently from far away on the West Lake road came the whinny of a horse; a

little later, a little nearer, a peal of laughter; then the sound of wheels and chattering voices. A wagonette, two spring wagons and a pony cart burst from Long Lane and wheeled right and left. They were full of grown-ups turned young for a day and youths that thought they would be young forever.

The wagonette, swinging down the road toward Maple house, suddenly swerved and plowed through the tall grass. Alan and Clem on the end seats were almost thrown out. Alan looked back at the road and stared. A fat donkey had claimed the right of way and held it. Several lengths of legs stuck out from her bulging sides. Behind her hurried a panting nurse.

Alan turned to Clem. "Do donkeys never die?"

"Oh! I hope not," said Clem gravely. "You change them. We changed ours while you were away."

"So she has been changed," said Alan. "Well, that's something."

"Silly," said Clem, "you've been seeing that donkey every day for weeks."

"No," said Alan, "this is the first time I've really seen her."

The sun took a last long look at Red Hill and dropped out of sight. Then, as though he would come back and look again, he sent up a broad afterglow that climbed and climbed till the tip of the very clouds that peeped over East mountain were tinged with the rosy light.

From an open upstairs window came Clem's soft voice. "Yes, dears, pink night-caps. Those big sleepy clouds are putting them on because they are just glad to go to bed."

"I want a pink night-cap."

"Why, darling, night-caps are only for white-headed people and white-headed clouds. Just wait until you're white-headed. Now climb into bed and I'll tell—"

Beyond the mountain-ash thickets a love-sick Bob White kept saying "Good-night," to his mate. She answered sleepily.

From Maple house, The Firs, and far down the road, from Elm house warm lights flashed out and settled down into a steady glow. A burst of young voices swept into the night and died away, followed into the silence by soft laughter. From The Firs came the last angry wail of the fat young god, choked off in midflight by the soft hand of sleep. Then the scurrying of many feet along the dusty road, silence, and last of all, the trailing whistle of a boy signaling good-night—sound saying good-by to a happy day.

Hours passed before the moon popped into the sky, hurrying just at first as though she knew she were forty minutes late again. One by one lights went out. Other lights gleamed from upper windows; then they, in turn, went out. Red Hill had gone to bed.

From Maple house Alan slipped out to smoke a last cigar. He hesitated a moment and then strode through the long grass laden with seed and just decking itself with dewy jewels for the night. He crossed to the old church. The door was open. He entered and climbed the crumbling stairs to the belfry. He jumped into one of the arches and sat down, his legs dangling.

His eyes wandered slowly over the familiar scene. From behind their trees Maple house, The Firs and Elm house blinked up at him dreamily. Before them ran the ribbon of road, white under moonlight, dipping at each end into the wide world. Up and down the road before The Firs, paced two figures—Gerry and Alix. Gerry's arm was around her. Long black shadows, all pointing to the west, like fallen silhouettes cut the moonlight. Above them, the autumn-painted trees gave out a golden echo of light.

Alan drew a great, quivering breath. "My boy, you have been far, far away," J. X. had said and he had answered, "yes, but I have come back." But it was only now, tonight, that he had really come back.

Alan's wandering eyes settled on Maple house. "Even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings," he whispered.

And then the peace of home descended upon him. On his scarred spirit he felt the touch of the healing hands of home. Its sweetness and its power, its love everlasting demanding love forever, knocked at his waking heart and found the door open. Far, far had he wandered in the world of mind and the world of men, but in the end he had come back like a Wayne to the eternal mother of the Waynes. Tonight he knew that his drifting soul had dropped anchor at last.

(THE END.)

His Willingness.

In attempting to descend the steps in front of his home the other day, J. Fuller Gloom slipped and went tumbling clear to the bottom. It seemed as if the majority of the residents of the neighborhood were either coming, going or looking out of their windows just at that moment.

"Are you seriously hurt?" asked a sympathetic passerby, assisting the pessimist to his feet.

"Probably," was the sour reply, "but not so badly but that if there is anyone in this vicinity who did not see me that time I will gladly do it all over again for his benefit!"—Kansas City Star.